

'Liberty nickels' don't always fetch big bucks

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers more questions from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—You said that a 1913 "Liberty nickel" sold for \$385,000 in a January auction. We happen to own four Liberty nickels dated 1899, 1903, 1908 and 1910, all in good condition. Are they worth big money, too?

J.T.

Arlington Heights

A—Definitely not. Your pieces might sell for 60 cents each if you're lucky. All have mintages of 22 million or more, making them common among collectors.

The 1913 is a prized rarity because only five specimens are known. Hobbyists believe a government worker secretly made the five coins in 1913 and then smuggled them out of the Philadelphia Mint building [all 1913 nickels were supposed to depict an Indian and a buffalo, the first year for that coin design].

Three other moderately rare Liberty nickels are the 1885 [worth \$300 in "good condition"], 1886 [\$60] and the 1912-S [\$50].

Q—We've been reading advertisements in coin magazines to gauge the market for silver and gold pieces. Several silver dollars are listed as being "with papers" and two high-priced gold coins have "impressive pedigrees." What do those terms mean?

T.M.

Chicago

A—"With papers" probably indicates that an independent expert had examined the silver dollar, declared it to be genuine and then evaluated its condition. The examiner issues a certificate of authentication [dubbed "papers" in the ads], which accompanies the coin as it is sold and resold among collectors.

The American Numismatic Association and others offer certification services for a modest fee.

Rarities enjoying "impressive pedigrees" previously were owned by one or more famous individuals. Such pieces tend to fetch top dollar on the hobby market.

Q—I found a \$1 bill with a blank front side, except for the serial numbers and the two seals. The dollar is uncirculated. What would it be worth?

H.T.

Oak Lawn

A—You own a major printing error that retails for at least \$250, according to hobby catalogues. U.S. paper money is printed in three stages: first the back side, then the front and finally the serial numbers and seals. Obviously, your bill missed the middle step.